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Critic at Large

Structure of American Society Provides It
and Birch Society With Certain Rights

BY BROOKS ATKINSON

I love Robert Welch.
His stuff is so warm,
And if you don't listen
He'll do you no harm.

THERE is some doubt that "warm" and "harm" are true rhymes, although they are legal.

But this bit of doggerel expresses a useful attitude to take toward the John Birch Society and Robert H. W. Welch Jr., its Jovian leader. In his crusade to undo American society he does not have the use of an official Government forum, which was Senator Joseph R. McCarthy's terrible weapon.

He is a citizen, like the rest of us, and entitled to express his opinions and urge everyone else to share them. He can describe General Eisenhower, Milton Eisenhower, Chief Justice Earl Warren and Allen W. Dulles as agents, either deliberate or unwitting, of Russian communism if he wants to, as other citizens can describe Senators Barry Goldwater and Everett McKinley Dirksen as royalists, fronting for King George III.

But he does not have a Congressman's immunity from libel; he cannot issue subpoenas and stage carnivals of licensed slander and vilification in the halls of Congress. There is nothing in the Constitution that forbids crackpots the privilege of talking nonsense. Even flying saucers can be discussed in public.

There is something rather beguiling about the spectacle of adults paying \$24 a year or \$1,000 for life to a grim society that would stamp out democracy and dismantle the social legislation of several generations. Comedy consists in the disparity between a man's exalted image of himself and the poor figure he actually cuts in the life of his times.

No doubt the members of the Birch Society are as patriotic as anybody else. No doubt they sincerely hope to save America from communism, socialism or the welfare state, to list the evils they object to on a descending scale. Very likely they love their wives and are kind to their children and would not knowingly bear false witness against a neighbor. But they stand to lose the democratic

of the people of the United States, and they cannot make the rest of us confuse democracy with communism. Nor can they convince us that governmental concern for the welfare of the citizens is a part of the Communist conspiracy.

It is in the nature of democratic government that nobody gets everything he wants or thinks right, although no one denies him the privilege of trying. In comparison with a population of 180 million people (many of them screwballs) the membership of the Birch Society, whatever it is, has no weight.

As a lot, Americans are intelligent and have high standards of fair play. It has been estimated that about 10 per cent of them tolerated Senator McCarthy in his gaudiest period. When the other 90 per cent got a look at him on television, he was through.

Apparently, the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the Senate Internal Security Committee are not sure that their jurisdiction extends to a fighting organization like the Birch Society. They are more concerned with the iniquitous thinking of citizens who do not approve of them. Investigating the Birch Society would be a little like investigating their own political attitudes — always a painful process. They might find themselves in contempt of Congress. So far, the Birch Society has not hacked anything out of the First Amendment. It lacks the backing of the Supreme Court.

As a taxpayer, involuntarily contributing to this year's appropriation of \$331,000 to sustain the Un-American Activities Committee, I hope our bailiffs of thought will let the Birch Society go its foolish way in peace. They can convince one another of the impossible — like members of the American Communist party. But public boredom chastens all. On occasions like this, it is always comforting to recall the experience of former President Millard Fillmore when he became the candidate of the Know-Nothing party in 1856. He was returned to Buffalo for rest.

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